



## Meet The Team: Kent Cochran

### Regional Transportation Manager, Southeast Region NPS

*People can follow any number of paths into working with the National Park Service transportation program. Some start as volunteers in parks, or as rangers. Others set out on Park Service career paths when in college, confident that they want a career working in the outdoors.*

For Kent Cochran, the regional transportation program manager for the Southeast Region of the NPS, the impetus for moving into government work was storms. Really big storms. “Hurricanes actually started my career with the government,” Kent says.

In high school and college, Kent had no idea that his career track would lead him to the National Park Service. “I thought I was going to be either a veterinarian or be doing something with agriculture or horticulture,” says

**Kurt Cochran, the regional transportation manager for NPS Southeast Region, says that hurricanes actually started his career with the Federal government.**



Kent, who spent a good part of his earliest years in the once-rural area surrounding Alpharetta, Georgia. “When I got into college, I started taking some agricultural classes, but also got into some engineering classes. I enjoyed that field, so I stayed there, and never went for the veterinarian or agricultural degrees.”

Once out of college with a degree in structural engineering, Kent went to work for a consultant. “I sure wasn’t thinking about refuge roads or national parks at that point,” Kent says. “In fact, I never dreamed that an engineer was associated with such things.” He worked for the consultant for about seven years, until a downturn in the economy in the mid- to late-80s caused a softening in the construction industry in Georgia.

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And that’s when hurricanes entered his life. Hurricane Hugo swept through the southeast in September 1989, following a track north of Charleston, South Carolina. There were a number of Forest Service areas and US Fish & Wildlife Service refuges severely damaged by the hurricane. Kent saw several ads placed in regional newspapers seeking engineers who could assist with repairing the hurricane damage. “I thought to myself, that’s interesting...what the heck does an engineer do on a wildlife refuge?” Kent said. “Because I hunt, I knew what a wildlife refuge was, but I never thought about an engineer being associated with one. So I applied for that position, and I was fortunate to be one of the two people selected.”

There were plenty of surprises waiting for Kent as he began visiting wildlife refuges and seeing just what power a storm like Hugo could pack. “On my first trip out to a refuge after I was hired, I listened to the refuge manager describe the area before the storm. He talked about the drive down to the marsh area, and the live oaks that formed a canopy over the road, and the beautiful visitor center. He told us he’d done everything by the book for securing everything, such as putting all the computers in the middle of the building, and put-

ting duct tape around all of the cracks in the doors and windows, and all that good stuff.”

And then the manager took Kent and the others out to the visitor center, or at least where the visitor center had been. “You couldn’t even find the foundation of where the building was supposed to be,” Kent said. “All that work and preparation is just out the window. You can do all the prep work you want to, but if the good Lord doesn’t want the building to stay there, it won’t.”

In 1998, while working as a project manager, Kent was asked to help launch the Refuge Roads program for the Southeast Region of the Fish & Wildlife Service, or what he often refers to simply as “Fish.”

“The Southeast region received the largest share of funding for the national Refuge Roads program,” Kent said. “I was asked to start that program up for the region. So I transferred out of the facilities program within the engineering group.” Even though it received the most funding, Kent said the program was still small relative to the Park Service; the entire national Refuge Roads program amounted to around \$30 million.

“I did the Refuge Roads program for nearly 2 1/2 years, and that’s when the Southeast region of the Park Service had a vacancy for a Federal Lands Highway Program (FLHP) coordinator in the Southeast region (SER).

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Because of his degree in structural engineering, Kent was often invited to be on teams that would go out and do structural evaluations after a large storm. “That was always a highlight in my work with the Park Service,” Kent said. “When storms would come through the Outer Banks, sometimes they would put us on a helicopter to fly into the remote areas to do structural analysis. Things are different now; they have interagency incident command (or IC) teams that go out and do the reviews of the facilities.”

Kent says he has enjoyed working in and around the national park properties. “When I was growing up, my family would often visit Kennesaw Mountain and Chickamauga, which are national battlefields, and of course a couple times each year we’d be at the Great Smoky Mountains National Park,” Kent said. “My whole life, I’ve been in and around the Parks. But I’d have to say that I never thought about them being national parks when I was a kid, they were just nice places to go.”

Nearly all of his work today is administrative, Kent says, adding that he hasn’t done any design work in years. “About 95% of my time is with the FLHP program,” said Kent. “I work with Lee Edwards and Elisabeth Hahn who is a transportation planner. When we get our long-range transportation program going, that will take up a good amount of Elisabeth’s time, but right now we’ve got her involved in a number of other planning projects in the Region’s parks.”

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*“Kent credits John Gentry, a former chief of maintenance for the Blue Ridge Parkway, as a key mentor.”*

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Kent said that the SER also has a total of five Denver Service Center (DSC) people permanently located at parks in the Southeast region: one with the Natchez Trace Parkway, two with the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, and two with the Blue Ridge Parkway.

Kent credits John Gentry, a former chief of maintenance for the Blue Ridge Parkway, as a key mentor. “He’d been with the Park Service for quite a while, and he was around for about the first five or six years that I was with the Park Service,” Kent said. “And I’ll tell you what, I found myself calling him more than anyone else for guidance and assistance and advice. I’d say, ‘John, what do you think about this’ or ‘how should this be?’ And when he gave me an answer, he would put aside where he was sitting as the head of maintenance for probably our largest park road system in the region, and he would talk just as if he were standing in my shoes. In other words, he wasn’t trying to persuade the money toward the Blue Ridge when he gave me guidance and

advice. That went a long way with me, and even today I think a lot about that.”

Kent also said that he has enjoyed an excellent working relationship with Eastern Federal Lands, a relationship that goes back to his time with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. “In fact, when I was hired into the Park Service, the people who hired me said that the reason I got hired was that they got a recommendation from Eastern Federal Lands that said, ‘Here’s someone we’ve been working with at Fish & Wildlife that you should consider.’ ”

“The Southeast region might work with Eastern Federal Lands more than some of the other NPS regions,” Kent said. “And we’ve gotten to work with some excellent people, including Anne Dayton, Holly Bell, and many others.”



**Kent Cochran, center in green safety helmet, takes part in a review session on the “Missing Link” portion of the Foothills Parkway. (NPS Photo)**

Kent added that Holly has recently really turned things around for interagency fund transfers. “Transferring funds to a state DOT is a major deal...I mean, it’s hard!” Kent said. “The National Park Service can’t just transfer funds to a state DOT. You’ve got to have special agreements in place, which require all kinds of legal reviews. It was always a long process to get funds transferred to a state DOT.”

“As a result of this last storm we had, Florida DOT is doing the repair work on our roads because it’s just

easier for them to do it. And they've got an interest in it because their state highways are on both sides of the Park, and they need it re-opened, because it's an emergency route and an evacuation route.”

“So, Holly said, ‘Let’s try to piggyback off the agreement the Forest Service uses to transfer funds to state DOTs.’ And that’s what we’ve been able to implement, and we’re getting the money transferred to the state DOT in like two weeks, instead of two years!”

Even though Kent didn’t end up with veterinarian or agricultural degrees, he’s still working with animals and the land when he’s not working with budget spreadsheets and project reports. “I’m an outdoors person, and we’re an outdoors family,” Kent said. “I still raise some cattle and cut and bale hay and all that stuff. And I have to say that’s a hobby because my wife will tell me real quick that it’s not a profit maker!”

Kent stresses that he doesn’t work for the job; he works for the family. “So my interests are anything and everything that my children do,” he said. “Sports and activities and all those things.” He’s proud of his wife and four children, with ages 19, 17, 15, and 13.

As this profile was being developed, Hurricane Sandy struck the Eastern Seaboard with devastating power, especially in the New Jersey/New York region. Whether ascribed to global warming, or just bad luck with weather, the number of serious storms that affect North America seems to be increasing.

It appears likely that Kent and his team will have plenty to keep them busy as they maintain the transportation networks in and through our National Parks in the Southeastern United States.